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ABSTRACT

This joint publication of the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities and the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education discusses the characteristics and roles of special education teachers. Topics include: why people become special educators; characteristics of special education teachers, including age, gender, diversity, education, and teaching experience; the kind of training special educators receive; state licensure and its role in the education and practice of special educators; the various duties of special education teachers, including direct teaching, paperwork, and collaboration, and consultation; the work settings of special education teachers, including public and private schools, self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, inclusive schools, residential schools, and special schools; shortages of special educators, including information on why special educators leave their profession; what special education teachers like about teaching; and the role of paraeducators. The digest closes with parent tips for working with special education teachers. A list of print resources is provided that address collaboration between special and general educators, in-service support and training, paraeducator resources, special educator preparation and certification, and special educator recruitment and retention. Video resources are also listed, along with a list of relevant organizations. (Contains 18 references.) (CR)

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Who's Teaching Our Children with Disabilities?

By Margie Crutchfield
Information Specialist
National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE)

Each day in the United States millions of children go off to school, all with different strengths and weaknesses, abilities and disabilities. Over five million of these children have been identified as having a specific disability such as autism, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, or a learning disability that necessitates some type of special instruction. In order to address the special needs of these children, schools rely upon people who have been specially trained to help them—special education teachers. In the daily lives of children and youth with disabilities, and in their long-term achievements in learning, special educators play a vital and indispensable role.

NICHCY and the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE) would like general educators, parents, administrators, those interested in becoming special educators, and others to have an opportunity to learn more about special education teachers. This joint publication of NICHCY and NCPSE is intended to open a window into the world of the special educator and answer the questions: who are special educators, why have they chosen this profession, what kind of training do they have, what do they do each day, what do they enjoy about their jobs, and why do some of them leave special education? Also discussed in this publication are the people who support special educators, namely paraeducators, often known as "teacher's aides." The role of parents is addressed as well, and suggestions are provided for supporting the valuable work that special educators do on behalf of our children with special needs.

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Why Do People Become Special Educators?

There are as many reasons for choosing special education teaching as a career as there are special education teachers. However, research (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Lenk, 1995; Siegel, Taylor, & Greene, 1996) has shown some common threads in many of these stories. Some potential teachers knew from an early age that this was what they wanted to do; some have said they felt they had a mission to work with children and specifically wanted to help children with disabilities. Not surprisingly, many special education teachers had some meaningful contact with a person (or persons) with a disability as they were growing up—maybe a sibling, or a neighbor, or a family friend—or maybe they worked in a summer camp for children with disabilities. These experiences helped them see the value of each person and the challenges and rewards that come from working with children with special needs. There is also a growing number of career changers—adults who decide to become special education teachers after retiring from their original profession or after finding that their first career did not have the significance and meaning they wanted.

Whatever their path to this career, almost all special education teachers begin their career with a desire to help others, by doing something such as working with children, and feel they can have an impact on how children with disabilities learn. They choose this career because they want to make a positive difference in the lives of children with disabilities.

Who Are Special Education Teachers?

In the 1993–1994 school year, there were over 350,000 full-time special education teachers in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). A recent analysis of data from 1990–91 (Cook & Boe, 1995) provides an interesting profile of special educators and how they are similar to, and different from, general educators.

Not suprisingly, many special educators had some meaningful contact with a person with a disability as they were growing up—a sibling, neighbor, or friend.

Age

Special educators make up about 10% of all teachers in the public sector. In general they tend to be younger than general educators. This is noteworthy because younger teachers are more likely to leave teaching than older teachers. Therefore, this difference in age can be one factor in the higher percentage of special educators who leave special education than general educators who leave the classroom.

Gender

Teaching has been, and continues to be, a female profession. Almost 90% of special education teachers at the elementary level are female, compared with 87% of general education teachers. There are interesting differences at the secondary level: 77% of secondary special education teachers are female, while only 53% of general education teachers at this level are female.

Diversity

The ethnic composition of special education and general education teachers is quite similar. Approximately eighty-six percent of the teachers, in both groups, are white. Ten percent are African-American, 2% are Hispanic, and 2% are other. However, these numbers do not match well with the makeup of the students in special education. Among special education students, 68% are white; 16%, African-American; 12%, Hispanic; and 4% other. These discrepancies have led to increased efforts to recruit minorities into special education careers. There are also very few data on the number of special education teachers with disabilities; the best estimate is 4%.

Certification in Main Teaching Field

Sometimes, usually because a school district cannot find certified applicants, teachers are employed or assigned to teach in a field where they are not fully certified. Ten percent of our special education teachers, compared with 6% of general education teachers, are not fully certified for their main teaching assignment. However, in areas where it is particularly difficult to secure special educators, such as rural areas, the percentage of noncertified teachers may be higher.

Highest Degree

A higher percentage of special education teachers (57%) than general education teachers (47%) have attained master's or doctorate degrees.

Teaching Experience

Special education teachers have, on the average, fewer years of teaching experience than general education teachers. Twelve percent of special education teachers have less than four years of teaching experience, while only 10% of general education teachers have less than four years.

What Kind of Training Do Special Educators Receive?

Almost 700 colleges and universities in the United States have programs to prepare students to become special education teachers (Weintraub & McLane, 1995). Most of these are at the bachelor's level. These programs typically require course work the school deems appropriate for teacher preparation; they also involve students in numerous experiences with children with disabilities. As such, the programs are designed to give students the course work and field work necessary to meet their state's licensure requirements. This means that a graduate of a state accredited program in Nebraska will meet the requirements for an entry-level teaching license in that state. (More discussion about teacher licensure is provided below, pg. 5.)

Since there is a great variety in state licensure requirements, there can also be a great deal of variety in the way colleges arrange their curricula. Most states require special education teachers to complete a bachelor's degree program, although some states require a master's for special education licensure. Other states require licensure in general education first, then additional course work in special education.

Colleges and universities are not only accredited by their states, but the teacher education programs at these institutions may also choose to seek accreditation by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE is the national accrediting body for teacher preparation programs. Schools accredited by NCATE have met rigorous standards established by working professionals in the teacher education field. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the professional organization representing special education teachers, administrators, and other professionals who work with children with disabilities, has developed guidelines for special education teacher preparation programs that have been adopted and are used by NCATE (Council for Exceptional Children, 1996). (For a list of accredited institutions, contact CEC or the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education [NCPSE]. See contact information on page 23.)

Potential special education teachers need to learn a great deal about children and youth with disabilities, teaching methods, classroom management, and other special skills. CEC guidelines require that students in special education teacher preparation programs receive course work and field activities in the following areas.

Philosophical, Historical, and Legal Foundations of Special Education

Persons preparing to be special education teachers learn about the history of special education in the United States. They learn about the laws that mandate services to children with disabilities and how these laws affect the services they provide. They are taught about the legal requirements related to such things as assessment, eligibility of students for services, and the placement of those students. They also receive instruction about the rights and responsibilities of parents, students, teachers, and schools.

Characteristics of Learners

Students in special education teacher preparation programs learn about the characteristics of children with disabilities and how they differ from and are similar to children without disabilities. These teachers-

About NICHCY

NICHCY, the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, is a clearinghouse that provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues. Our special focus is children and youth with disabilities, birth to age 22. In addition to our publications we offer a number of services: personal responses to questions; referrals to other organizations and agencies; information searches of our databases and library; and technical assistance to parent and professional groups. Anyone may contact NICHCY for information.

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"My favorite success story is about one of my students with autism. I first had him enter my class two and a half years ago. At that time he wouldn't walk five feet at a time without falling to the ground, kicking, and screaming at the top of his lungs. We'd get him up and walk him and five feet later he'd do the same thing. Let me tell you, it was a very, very long walk down the hallway.

"In the past two years he's come a long way. He now walks down the hallway, and sits quietly in his seat. He can write out his name and trace letters and shapes. His most recent accomplishment has been the completion of a 1,000-piece puzzle. How about that for progress!"

—Sharon Mierow
Special Education Teacher

in-training study the different characteristics of individuals with disabilities and how these disabilities affect the cognitive, physical, cultural, social, and emotional needs of the individual. They learn about normal, delayed, and disordered communication patterns of people with special needs. And they learn about the effects of various medications on all aspects of the behavior of individuals with special needs.

Assessment, Diagnosis, and Evaluation

Students who are studying to become special education teachers learn about typical procedures used for screening, assessing, and evaluating children with disabilities. They study the appropriate use and limitations of particular assessment tools, how to interpret the results, and how these results affect placement of the student. They also learn how to monitor a student's ongoing progress.

Instructional Content and Practice

Special education student teachers need to have a solid understanding of the different learning styles of individuals with exceptionalities and how to adapt curricula, learning environments, and their own teaching style to these differences. They learn techniques for modifying instructional methods and materials. They learn about appropriate curricula for developing motor, cognitive, academic, social, language, affective, career, and functional life skills for individuals with exceptionalities and about life skills instruction appropriate to independent, community, and personal living and employment. They also learn how different cultural perspectives influence the relationships among families, schools, and communities and how these may impact effective instruction.

Planning and Managing the Teaching and Learning Environment

Future special education teachers study basic classroom management theories, methods, and techniques for individuals with exceptional learning needs as well as ways in which technology can assist with planning and managing the teaching and learning environment.

Managing Student Behavior and Social Interaction Skills

Students preparing to become special education teachers need to learn the most effective ways to provide positive behavioral support so that the classroom is a safe and positive place for learning. Special education student teachers are taught ethical considerations involved in positive behavioral support as well as the applicable laws and procedural safeguards. They also learn about how their own attitudes and behaviors can influence the behaviors of their students. They are taught effective strategies for crisis prevention and intervention.

Communication and Collaborative Partnerships

Special education teachers need to learn to work effectively as part of a team. Therefore, students in teacher preparation programs need to learn communication and collaboration skills that are effective with students, parents, and other school and community personnel. They examine the typical concerns of parents of children with disabilities and ways to help parents deal with these concerns. They learn about the roles of students, parents, teachers, and other personnel in planning and implementing an individualized education program (IEP).

Professionalism and Ethical Practices

Students preparing to become special education teachers need to explore and understand their own personal cultural biases and differences and how these could affect their teaching. They also need to be aware of the importance of the teacher serving as a model for their students. Finally, all special education student teachers need to fully understand the ethics of confidentiality.

Experience with Children

Most states require that students have some kind of field experience with exceptional students prior to student teaching (Andrews, 1996). University programs usually provide a variety of experiences in real classrooms for their students, so that they may become familiar with different types of students and different kinds of settings. They can do this by observing classes at a local school, helping to tutor a child with special needs, or shadowing a special education teacher as he or she goes through the day. All states require that those studying to become special education teachers perform student teaching as part of their training. The length of this practicum varies by state but is usually at least 8 to 10 weeks of full-time teaching.

State Licensure and Its Role in the Education and Practice of Special Educators

Most colleges and universities prepare students to meet the requirements established by their state for a teaching license. Therefore, their curriculum will include and sometimes reflect the standards established by the state. State licensure requirements are set by standards boards. Most state standards boards have members who are appointed by the governor and who serve in an advisory capacity to the state department of education. However, some standards boards are independent of departments of education and are accountable to the state legislatures (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994).

Categorical vs. Noncategorical Licensure

There is a great deal of variation among the requirements and standards states use to license special education teachers. Some states have "categorical" licensure, which means that the state licenses a teacher to teach students in a particular disability category, such as those with hearing impairments, physical disabilities, or mental retardation. States that have "noncategorical" or a generic licensure give teachers a general license to teach any child with a disability.

Most states have a blend of categorical or noncategorical licensure, giving licenses for some disabilities and blending several disabilities into one licensure category (such as mild disabilities). Some states have categories related to severity of the disability; for example, Arkansas's licensure titles include "teacher of the mildly disabled" (all age groups), "teacher of the deaf or hard-of-hearing," and "teacher of the seriously emotionally disturbed" (all age groups). Other states have titles related to the age of the child. For example, Maryland has titles for generic infant primary, generic elementary/middle, generic secondary/adult, as well as titles for teacher of those with hearing impairments, teacher of those with severe/profound disabilities, and teacher of those with visual impairments.

Not only are there differences between categorical and noncategorical licensure, but there is also a wide variety of terminology used to describe disabilities or to describe categories. There are over 100 different titles used to describe disabilities among all the state requirements (Andrews, 1996). For example, acoustically disabled, deaf/hard-of-hearing, hearing impaired, aurally disabled, and communications disabled are all titles different states use to describe licensure for teachers of children who have hearing impairments.

This great variety among state special education teacher licensures becomes a particularly difficult issue when fully certified special education teachers move from state to state. A person who has a license to teach in New Mexico (which issues only a generic special education license for all children in grades K–12) may have a difficult time if he or she moves to Nevada, which has 12 different categorical titles. Most states have dealt with this issue by providing a teacher who is fully licensed in another state with an initial, temporary, or provisional license that allows the teacher to teach while he or she takes the university course work necessary to meet the new state's requirements. Although this does work in practice, it is an obstacle for recruiting teachers and can be very frustrating for a qualified experienced teacher to be told he or she isn't "qualified enough" for a particular state.

Reciprocity

Over 30 states have signed the Interstate Certification Agreement (ICA), which makes it somewhat easier for a teacher moving from one state to another to receive a license when both states have signed the ICA (Andrews, 1996). These states are said to have "reciprocity"—that is, they will honor licenses from the other states. However, this does not mean that the teacher automatically receives a full license in the new state. The agreement means that teachers can receive another state's *initial* license, which permits them to teach. Any of that state's other standard requirements to maintain or renew the license must be met, as well as any "non-educational" requirements (e.g., fingerprinting, background checks). Although reciprocity agreements have made

the process a bit easier, in practice, there is no such thing as full reciprocity. There are almost always state-specific requirements that must be met before a full teaching license is granted.

Professional Standards

For entry-level special education teachers, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has developed standards that are parallel to their accreditation guidelines (Council for Exceptional Children, 1996). CEC is advocating that states align state licensure standards with CEC standards, thus making it easier for a fully licensed special education teacher in one state to be issued a full license by another state.

While CEC is working on establishing entry-level guidelines, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), a national organization whose mission is to establish rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, is in the process of developing standards for exemplary-level special education teachers (NBPTS, 1995). Just as a "board-certified" physician is a doctor who has mastered and demonstrated a high level of expertise (beyond entry level), a special education teacher who has met the high standards and received certification from the NBPTS can be considered a "master teacher."

To earn NBPTS certification, teachers must demonstrate their knowledge and skills through an intensive year-long series of assessments that include portfolios of student work, written reflection, videotapes of classroom sessions, and demanding analyses of classroom teaching. Teachers also must complete a day-long series of assessment exercises that include essays that probe the depth of their knowledge and thinking (NBPTS, 1995).

Continuing Education

A teacher's education does not end at graduation. Most states require that teachers continue to take some form of course work, experience, training, or renewal activity to improve their skills, increase their knowledge, and maintain the validity of their license (Andrews, 1996). Each state has different regulations on how to meet this requirement, but usually it can be met through additional university course work, special training activities developed by the school district or state agency, participation in professional conferences, and so on.

What Do Special Education Teachers Do?

It is difficult to give a simple picture of the daily life of a special educator—because there is so much variety among teachers. Special educators can have many roles and responsibilities in any given school setting. Their activities each day will be determined by the children they are teaching, the kinds and severity of disabilities those students have, the children's ages, and the setting in which the teachers are working. A high school special education teacher who is co-teaching a class with a general education teacher, a special education teacher in a self-contained middle school classroom for children with emotional and behavior disorders, and an elementary special education teacher in a resource room who has children coming in and out of the classroom all day will all have very different activities and responsibilities. But no matter what setting they are working in or who they are teaching, the special education teachers' responsibilities usually fall into three categories: direct teaching (and preparing for it), preparing appropriate reports and other paperwork, and collaborating with other professionals and parents. Juggling the many demands on their time is a challenging and sometimes frustrating endeavor.

Direct Teaching

One of the primary responsibilities of the special education teacher is to provide instruction and adapt and develop materials to match the learning styles, strengths, and special needs of each of their students. Most special education teachers spend close to the majority of their classroom time actually teaching their students (Allinder, 1994). This does not include the time they spend beyond the regular school day preparing lesson plans, grading papers, and meeting with other professionals. The methods they use, and the learning goals they develop, will be determined by the students' abilities, age, setting, and many other variables.

It has been said that in general education the school system dictates the curriculum, but in special education, the child's individual needs dictate the curriculum (Lieberman, 1985). For example, dressing, eating, and toileting could be a typical part of the curriculum for many students with severe disabilities but are not normally taught in general education classrooms. Similarly, a child who has a hearing impairment may receive special training in sign language, while a child who is blind may need specific instruction in braille. These would obviously not be a part of the typical general education curriculum.

The challenge for special education teachers is to assess how each child learns best and then determine the best way to design or modify instruction so that the child can achieve the expected educational

outcome. This can be especially challenging for a teacher who has several students with different disabilities of varying severity in the same classroom. The special education teacher must meet the needs of all of these students. For example, a special education teacher in elementary school could have a class of ten children, two with hearing impairments, one with autism, and six who have varying degrees of developmental delays. This teacher has quite a challenge to develop learning activities and strategies that will be effective for all of his or her students.

Paperwork

Special education teachers have a great deal of paperwork to complete. They have the same kinds of paperwork demands that general education teachers do—attendance reports, discipline reports, grading homework and tests, just to mention a few. But they are also required to prepare other forms and reports; for example, special education teachers usually play a lead role in preparing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each student. They also maintain records that document a student's progress toward meeting the goals and objectives specified in the IEP.

Federal, state, and local school district regulations and policies require complete reports of students' placement and progress. Writing up these reports usually falls on the special education teachers. These regulations and policies can change from year to year (and, some say, day to day). And every change can mean a change in the paperwork needed for documentation. Special education teachers who choose to leave teaching often cite the abundance of paperwork as one of the primary contributors to their high level of stress and decision to change jobs (Billingsley, 1993).

The increase in the number of lawsuits filed against school districts concerning the placement and education of children with disabilities has made it even more critical that teachers maintain accurate and complete records.

Special education teachers never work completely alone. Even those who work in self-contained classrooms work as part of a team in some way.

Collaboration and Consultation

Special education teachers never work completely alone. Even those who work in self-contained classrooms work in some way as part of a team. Some schools have established teams to help plan appropriate adaptations and educational interventions for students who are having difficulty in general education classes.

Depending on a child's disability and the school setting, special education teachers need to work with speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, school social workers, general education teachers, and community workers to plan and implement the best education strategies for each child. Special education teachers who work in inclusive settings or who co-teach or team-teach with general education teachers must spend enough time to adequately plan, develop, and implement an educational environment that is challenging and appropriate for all the students in the class, those with disabilities and those without.

Special education teachers usually serve as a resource on special education issues to other staff in the school—teachers, administrators, speech-language pathologists, parents, and others. Not only do they teach their students when they are in the classroom, but they also keep up with them throughout the day, wherever they may be. To do all of this effectively, special education teachers need to maintain positive relationships with the principal, other teachers, and other personnel.

Parents are also an important part of the team. They are the experts on their child. Both parents and teachers have much to contribute to the educational planning for children with disabilities; if they work together, they can be a powerful team.

Special educators can act as a liaison between community agencies or organizations and their school. For example, a teacher may need to work with the local Juvenile Probation Agency with regard to a student. This could involve being the contact in the school for the probation officer who will check on the student's progress and attendance. The teacher can also advise the probation officer of any meetings with the student and coordinate any necessary activities. As another example, a teacher may work with the local independent living agency and the vocational rehabilitation agency to help set up a transition plan for a student getting ready to graduate from school.

A Day in the Life of Co-Teachers

Debbie Boyce, General Educator
Chris Ohm, Special Educator

Where: Frederick, Maryland
Education: Debbie: Bachelor's in Math and Science Education, Master's in Counseling; Chris: Bachelor's in Public Relations and Psychology, Master's in Special Education
Teaching: Debbie: 7 years general education, 1 year co-teaching; Chris: 2 years, both co-teaching
Students: 22 students—half of whom have special education classification, half of whom aren't in special education but need extra support in math
Class type: Co-taught 7th grade mathematics

Making Co-Teaching Work

Chris: The key to making co-teaching work is joint planning. As a special education co-teacher, you can't just walk into the classroom and expect to be able to work together as equals. You must take the time to plan how to handle each lesson. You must both know all the curriculum so that you can switch back and forth with your co-teacher and support each other's efforts, and teach the class yourself if your co-teacher is absent. You have to have the attitude that you are a teacher first and a special educator second. If you don't know the curriculum, you are not a co-teacher; you are just an assistant.

Debbie: At first, it takes a while to get used to having another adult in the classroom with you. Teachers are used to having their classroom be their own domain. It takes a little while to get used to sharing, to become accustomed to the other person's methods of doing things, perspective, and pace.

Advice to Other Educators About Co-teaching

Debbie: I would recommend to any general educator who has the opportunity to co-teach to absolutely do it! It's a unique inclusive technique, without which some students would not get out of their self-contained classroom. Before co-teaching I was interested in students with special needs, but I felt incompetent to teach them because I didn't know much about how to meet their needs. Working with Chris has impacted how I will teach for the rest of my life and has made me a better teacher in all my classes.

Chris: I love co-teaching. It has a lot of benefits. You get to bounce ideas off each other, and help each other if one of you is having difficulty getting the students to understand part of the lesson. It's also great for the kids because you are modeling good interactive behavior. I would suggest to any interested special educator to take a class in co-teaching. It's important to learn how to co-teach the right way—equally.

All of this collaboration, consultation, and working together requires time, something too many special educators don't have. It is probably true that educators never have enough time to do all they want to do. But it is certainly true that to work effectively, and to be as effective as possible for children with disabilities, special education teachers need the time to work and plan with parents and other professionals. Many special education teachers are not given enough free time in the regular school day to make appointments with other staff members or parents; consequently they may be required to meet outside of regular school hours or during lunch or other breaks. Many special education teachers who leave the classroom say that one of the reasons they did so was the lack of time to meet all of their responsibilities (Billingsley, 1993).

Where Do Special Education Teachers Work?

The duties and responsibilities of a special education teacher are greatly influenced by the setting where she or he is working. Most special education teachers work in public elementary and secondary schools; some teach in private schools; others work in residential facilities, hospitals, and clinics; and some work with students who are homebound.

Public and Private Schools

The majority of special education teachers (95%) work in public schools; a much smaller number (4%) work in private schools (Henke, Choy, Geiss, & Broughman, 1996). Within these schools, special education teachers work in a variety of settings. Some work in self-contained classrooms; that is, they

are with the same group of children in a classroom for most of the day. The majority of special educators work in resource room settings, where they provide instruction to students with disabilities who come in for part of the school day, either individually or in small groups. More and more schools are using an inclusive model, in which children with disabilities receive most, if not all, of their instruction and services in the general education classroom. This model requires that special education teachers work even more closely with general education teachers.

Self-Contained Classroom

A little over 20% of children with disabilities spend their entire school day in a classroom specifically set aside for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Usually these students have severe disabilities and require a great deal of personal attention. These classes tend to be small and, because of the high demand of the students, usually have at least one teacher and a paraprofessional. (See "A Day in the Life of a Special Educator" sidebar, right.) Typically, one classroom can contain students with a variety of disabilities. For example, a preschool special education class could contain 10 students. The class could include children with hearing impairments, children with mental retardation, and children with severe physical disabilities as well as children with other disabilities.

The classroom teacher uses the curriculum to plan and implement instructional activities; works to maintain close relationships with each child's parents; handles the paperwork and progress reports for each child; advocates for the children and for the special education program within the school system; and coordinates treatment plans and

A Day in the Life of a Special Educator

Sharon Mierow

Where:	Dallas, Texas
Education:	Bachelor's in Music; certification as a special educator
Teaching:	Has taught LIFE (living and functional environment) Skills class for the past 5 years
Students:	1st–4th graders with moderate to severe disabilities (e.g., autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, Fragile X, and other rare syndromes)
Class type:	Self-contained special education class within a regular school; students participate in art, library, physical education, music, and lunch with the other students in the school

A Typical Day

We have a very structured routine. Each day we start with class breakfast, which is followed by personal hygiene activities: using the bathroom, brushing teeth, and washing hands. After this, we have reading time. Each student's reading time activity is tailored to his or her ability level. After reading, we have 15 minutes of free time. During this time, I change the diapers of those students who need it.

Next, we have what we call "Larger Group." This is a combination of the two LIFE Skills classes and consists of 14 students, ages 6 to 12. During "Larger Group" we work on the unit of the week—nutrition, going to the zoo, space, health. We do many activities, including sign language, music therapy, and large motor activities.

Then, we return to our regular class size and do seat work. We do different activities with each student: fine motor skills, cutting, pasting, tracing, and range of motion. During this part of the day, the occupational therapist and speech pathologist come in to work with the students.

Each afternoon we have our "working" part of the day. We do a different adaptive social skill each day of the week. Monday, we wash our classroom windows; Tuesday, we clean our tables; Wednesday, we sweep the floor; and so on throughout the week. It's basically vocational education on a very small scale. The last hour of each day is devoted to music, physical education, library, or art class.

What do I like best about teaching? The kids. It's very rewarding to see their improvements.

A Day in the Life of an Itinerant Special Educator

Ellie White

Where: Chicago, Illinois
Education: Bachelor's in Animal Science, minor in Education; Master's in Special Education
Teaching: First year as an elementary-level itinerant special educator in a suburban school district; Ellie teaches in two schools
Students: 9 students from various general education classes; students' disabilities include autism, Down syndrome, and learning disabilities
Class type: Pull-out and in-class support

Moments from Her Typical Day

I spend two hours each day with my student with Down syndrome—three mornings and two afternoons each week, so I'm able to get the full spectrum of his day. Since he does well with loud, interactive activities that aren't adaptable to his regular classroom, most of the time I work with him in a pull-out situation. Then I drive to the other school I work in.

I spend one to one and a half hours each day with my student with autism. I work with him both in his regular classroom and out. Since getting him involved in lots of social interaction is a very high priority, we've developed a volunteer "peer buddy" helping system for him.

My seven students with learning disabilities all come to work with me in my classroom. I teach them both math and reading, working with them both in groups and one-on-one. Many of them are a grade level behind in reading. Since self-esteem is an issue with my students with learning disabilities, I make sure I work on something they are good at as well as something they have difficulty with.

We have weekly team meetings for both my student with Down syndrome and my student with autism. All of the people involved with each student come (general educator, speech therapist, occupational therapist, paraprofessional, physical therapist), and we discuss techniques that will enable the student with disabilities to participate with the rest of the class. I also make sure that I'm available to the regular classroom teachers to answer questions, and I check in with them during the week to see how things are going.

I love working with the kids. It demands a lot of creativity and a lot of time. It's wonderful to see the students learning, to see their faces when they finally understand something.

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schedules with related services personnel such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists. In addition, the special education teacher is responsible for making sure that children in his or her class receive any required medication or medical treatment. This can be particularly important for a child who is medically fragile or terminally ill.

Resource Room

Almost half of the children with disabilities (43%) spend the majority of their time in general education classrooms and may receive services outside of the classroom for a short period of time. Another 30% spend at least 40% of their time in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). These students, who spend much of their time in a general education class, will come to the special education classroom or resource room where the special education teacher provides specialized instruction to the students either individually or in groups. The special education teacher may spend some time with a student or a small group of students working on such things as study skills, organization and test-taking strategies, problem-solving skills, and other strategies they can use to learn more effectively and efficiently. The special education teacher also works with the general education teacher to develop lesson plans, materials, and tests; teach specific learning strategies and study skills; and adapt curriculum materials so that they are appropriate for each student. The special education resource teacher's responsibilities also include assessment, developing IEPs, and meeting with parents.

Resource rooms (also called "pull-out" models) can be dynamic places—students come and go according to their individual sched-

ules, so resource room teachers must have appropriate learning experiences prepared for each student. They also need to be supervising the students working at desks or computers, giving each student appropriate help, encouragement, and feedback. They are probably dealing with students from all different grades or levels with varying disabilities.

Inclusive Schools

More and more schools are moving to an inclusive model, in which children with disabilities receive most of their instruction and services in a general education classroom. This can change the roles, duties, and challenges of the special education teacher. (See "A Day in the Life" sidebars, on inclusion facilitator, co-teachers, and itinerant special educator.) In these settings, the special education teacher acts as a resource and consultant to the general education teacher, may co-teach, and may also supervise paraprofessionals who may implement more of the one-on-one work with the child in the classroom. It is expected that these roles as consultant, co-teacher, and collaborator will increase in the future.

A special education teacher working with a general education teacher in an inclusive setting will assist in developing lesson plans, curriculum, and tests; will collaborate with other teachers to improve or add to current instructional strategies to best meet the learning needs and styles of all the children; team-teach lessons; teach specific learning strategies and study skills; provide small-group support or individual tutoring in the class as needed; and adapt materials for individual students.

For example, a fifth grade class that includes several students with

A Day in the Life of an Inclusion Facilitator
Mary Malone

Where: Frederick, Maryland
Education: Bachelor's in Education
Teaching: 14 years of special education, including self-contained classroom teaching, resource room, testing, and co-teaching classes
Students: 8 fully included students, 11–14 years old, various disabilities
Class type: Works with general educators to successfully include children with disabilities in their classrooms

Typical Duties

Each day is a different. I work with my students, their teachers, and instructional assistants modifying and implementing lessons. Teachers can apply the modifications in all their classes, even where inclusion students are not present. Teaching the instructional assistants to successfully modify curriculum independently gives me more time to juggle other roles.

One of the most important parts of my day is meeting with a multidiscipline team of teachers, related service providers (such as occupational therapists and speech teachers), parents, and administators to share success stories and brainstorm ways to solve problems. At these team meetings we may decide to educate a class on a specific disability, come up with a plan to increase social integration for a student, or talk about ways to deal with challenging behaviors.

In addition to working in different classrooms, I do diagnostic testing. I spend time working on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and ARDs (Admit, Review and Dismiss). ARDs are special education meetings.

I am also the leader of the special education team at our school—six special education teachers. We meet regularly to discuss problems or brainstorm techniques to try with different students.

I like the new and innovative thoughts and techniques regarding inclusion, and I enjoy working to implement them. In this job I am pulled in many different directions but the rewards are immeasurable.

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A Day in the Life of a Special Educator

Laura Zappia

Where: Suffolk County, New York
Education: Bachelor's and Master's in Special Education
Teaching: 15 years
Students: Middle school-aged children who have severe emotional disturbances and behavioral disorders (ED/BD)
Class type: Self-contained class within a self-contained public school that serves 12 school districts; class size 6 students

Typical Day

I work on subjects and tasks that may be harder and more frustrating for my students, such as vocabulary, spelling, and reading, early in the day when everyone is fresher. In the afternoon I do review work and go over basic skills.

Besides academics, the focus of what I do is work on each student's behavior problems. During the day the classroom aide monitors each student's behavior and keeps behavior minutes or "point sheets." Each student's behavior is assessed every 15 to 30 minutes. If the students are lower functioning, behavior is assessed more often. The point sheets help you monitor the students' behavior, but also how your own behavior as a teacher is either working or not working.

One of the keys to teaching students with ED/BD is to find out what is valuable to them. If a student likes to go to extra gym time, you reward him with that when he participates more in class or does something positive.

Since many of these students have great problems with self-control, our main goal is to try and decrease their worst behavior. For instance, if a student is cursing 20 times a day, then you work on getting it down to 10 times a day. Then you cut it down to five. We work on achieving our ultimate goal in small steps.

My students also need help in thinking about the consequences of their actions. If a student throws his book across the room saying he won't read anymore, I coach him along. "You've already read ten pages, and you only have two paragraphs left. You're having a good day. You can either read the rest of the page, or lose the reward you've earned." More likely than not the student will finish the reading. When their worst behavior is under control, you focus on the next most apparent one. By the end of the year you are working on more typical problems, such as getting them to turn in their homework.

I keep notes every day on every child. This way I can assess both the students' behavior and my own. The children I work with change gradually. You have to try a technique for at least 30 days to see if it is making any difference. Many times a behavior will get worse before it gets better. We start each day with a clean slate.

learning disabilities begins a unit on the seasons. The special education teacher knows that one of the students has a learning disability that makes it difficult for him to comprehend material by reading, but discovered he was able to learn the material if he listened to it. The two teachers prepare tape recordings of the appropriate textbook material and then give the child time to listen. Another child with a learning disability needs to have a modified list of spelling words. The goal of both teachers is that all the children in the class are provided with appropriate classroom and homework assignments so that they all are learning, are challenged, and are participating in the classwork.

Residential Schools, Separate Schools, Homebound

A small percentage of children with disabilities receive special education services in separate schools for children with disabilities (3.9%) (see "A Day in the Life of a Special Educator" sidebar, left), in residential facilities (0.9%), and in home or hospital settings (0.5%) (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The percentage of children with disabilities receiving services in separate or residential schools has steadily decreased over the last decade. More and more of these children are being served in regular public schools.

Homebound or hospital education programs are available to children with severe physical and health impairments. If a child's medical condition necessitates hospitalization or treatment at home for a lengthy period (generally 30 days or more), the local district is obligated to develop an IEP and to provide appropriate education services to the child through a qualified teacher.

Most hospitalized homebound children are visited regularly by itinerant teachers or tutors hired by the school district. Some school programs use closed-circuit TV systems to enable children to hear and participate in class discussions and demonstrations from their beds.

Class Size

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal legislation that mandates services for children with disabilities, does not contain any specific requirements for class size (number of students a teacher is instructing at a given time) or caseload (total numbers of students for whom a teacher has responsibility). States can choose to establish specific requirements or ratios, and many have. However, the states are required under the IDEA to provide a free appropriate education for all children with disabilities.

Most states include in their regulations a combination of criteria for class sizes and caseloads; some criteria are the age of the students, the severity and type of disability, and the extent of intervention required. Alabama, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and West Virginia are some of the states that use combinations of criteria.

Are There Shortages of Special Educators?

Yes. Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (originally called the Education for the Handicapped Act), there has been a concern about having enough qualified special education teachers (and related services personnel) to meet the growing number of children covered by the law. Special education teachers have been consistently in short supply and have been designated as a critical shortage teaching area.

Although the number of special education teachers employed has risen almost every year, so has the number of teaching positions that are vacant or filled by teachers who are not appropriately licensed for their assignment. The most recent data (from the 1993–94 school year) indicate that 330,866 fully certified special education teachers are employed in the schools, with 27,124 positions either vacant or filled with teachers who were not fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Although there has been an increase in the number of bachelor is degrees granted in special education over the last decade (6,507 in 1987–88; 7,867 in 1991–92), this increase is not enough to meet the annual shortage. Clearly, there are not enough new graduates each year to meet the demand.

The greatest numerical shortages are for teachers of children with specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and multiple disabilities. The greatest percentage of shortages (number of needed teachers divided by the number employed) are for teachers of children with autism, serious emotional disturbances, traumatic brain injury, deaf-blindness, and multiple disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Data from every state show an inadequate supply of qualified special education teachers, but some areas of the country have greater shortages than others. It is not surprising that those states whose population is growing (e.g., Florida, Arizona) continue to have the greatest need for special education teachers. Typically, rural and urban areas in all states have greater shortages than suburban areas. Some school districts have such a hard time filling their special education teacher vacancies that they offer bonuses or other incentives to teachers willing to relocate there.

Another component to the shortage issue is that a higher percentage of special education teachers leave the field of special education from one year to the next than do general education teachers (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, & Weber, 1995). About 11% of special education teachers leave special education each year, compared with 6% of general education teachers. However, of the 11% of special education teachers who leave annually, 5% transfer to general education and 6% leave the teaching profession altogether. Therefore, the major source of the difference in attrition rates is the number of special education teachers going into general education teaching positions. Although these special education teachers may bring excellent skills and insight into general education classrooms, it still means that they leave a vacant position behind.

Why Do Special Education Teachers Leave?

Special education is a demanding profession with many challenges. This can be especially true for first- or second-year teachers. Special education teachers are most likely to leave teaching during the first five years. Those who make it through those first challenging years are more likely to continue to teach for many more.

Beginning special education teachers encounter many of the same problems as general education teachers, including discipline concerns, parent difficulties, and inad-

equate or insufficient materials. Beginning special education teachers also have to put into practice collaboration skills they may or may not have learned as part of their college education; they must face IEP requirements; and, perhaps for the first time, they must supervise paraprofessionals. Because those beginning teachers who have had a positive first employment experience are more likely to remain as teachers, or, if they do leave teaching, are more likely to return at a later date, over 30 states have implemented programs to help ease the transition for novice teachers (Andrews, 1996). Some states have mentor programs, where an experienced teacher is assigned to a first-year teacher to help ease his or her adjustment.

Job stress leads some special educators, both novice and experienced, to switch to general education or to leave teaching altogether (Gonzalez, 1995). As mentioned earlier, paperwork is often cited as a primary stress for special educators. Having to spend so much time completing required reports, including evaluations and transition plans for students moving out of special education, is frustrating to many special education teachers because it means that they are not able to spend the time they would like with their students. And for most, teaching the children is why they chose special education as a career.

Other frequently mentioned sources of stress are lack of support by administrators and isolation from other school faculty. If administrators do not understand the roles and responsibilities of the special education teacher, they may fail to recognize the significance of the teacher's challenges and accomplishments. This can translate into limited assistance with specific problems like discipline, lack of appropriate materials, and release time for necessary planning and collaboration.

Often there may be only one or two special education teachers in a school building, and, too frequently, the special education teacher's office or classroom (if there is one at all) is in an outlying or isolated part of the building. This makes it difficult for the special education teacher to interact with general education teachers and to become an involved, participating member of the school environment. Without other special education professionals at hand for support, advice, new ideas, and encouragement, special educators can feel alone and professionally out on a limb. They may also be resented by general educators who think special educators have it easy because of their smaller classes and who do not understand the additional demands and paperwork involved (Greene, 1993–94).

Another source of stress for special education teachers can be overwhelming student needs. Many children with disabilities have social and emotional needs that go beyond their educational difficulties. Teaching these children can be highly demanding, both physically and mentally. It is not surprising that one of the highest attrition rates is for teachers of children with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Some states have implemented programs designed to help retain special educators. For example, Maine has developed the Maine Support Network, which provides fall and spring support meetings, a winter retreat, and summer teachers' academies to give special education teachers throughout the state opportunities for collegial support, forums for problem solving, excellent training opportunities, and the opportunity to tap into state and regional resources.

Special educators use regular games to teach concepts—"Twister" can be used to teach right and left, and the card game "Uno" can be used to teach colors and numbers.

What Do Special Education Teachers Like About Teaching?

Despite the many challenges facing special education teachers every day, most special education teachers love their jobs and are committed to the children they serve. For them, what makes special education such a special career? What do they see as the benefits unique to special education? The following comments are from several special education teachers who describe the reasons they love what they do and the rewards they receive.

Developing Close Relationships with Children and Families

Most special education teachers work closely with and develop relationships with the children and their families. These relationships bring special rewards to the teacher:

What do I love about it? I love the kids. They are the most loving people in the world. They will help you when you are down. The parents are also great. When they see the teacher as an advocate, they will be on your side forever.
— Kathy Bulle, 6th-grade learning disabilities teacher

What do I love about being a special education teacher? The students I work with. No two days are ever the same. I conduct many evaluations and like to work with parents to help them see their child's abilities as opposed to their disabilities.
— Linda Novak, Resource Teacher

Having an Impact

Many special education teachers also indicate their desire to have a positive impact on the lives of the children they work with, and they know that their input makes a difference in the current and future lives of these students:

I love that look that appears on children's faces when they realize they can do something today that they could not do yesterday. Those moments make it all worthwhile!
— Kathy Pongor, Special Education Teacher

My greatest satisfaction is seeing the children in my class make real gains and knowing that I have helped them get to where they need to be, so that they are prepared to move to their next placement.
— Ibé Crawley, Preschool Special Educator

I was a general education teacher for 10 years and seemed to always get the cluster of students with disabilities in my classroom. Because I didn't have any formal special education training, I questioned whether I was meeting their needs. After seeing the need for and receiving formal special education training, I felt better equipped to meet everyone's needs. The greatest challenge and joy I receive is in meeting the needs of both general education and special education students in a general education setting without identifying who has a disability and who does not.
— Elizabeth L. Wikfors, Secondary School Teacher

I love my job. The kids I work with have a very hard time controlling themselves. It's great to see them gain confidence, learn to like themselves, and gain self-control. It's great to see them like school and want to come each morning. You get to see them participate in class more and more. You teach them to give themselves a chance.
— Laura Zappia, Middle School Special Educator

The biggest challenge to me is working with so many different kids with such a variety of needs. I look on my job as a practice. We say doctors have a practice and lawyers have a practice. Well, teachers have a practice, too. We are constantly learning new techniques and new approaches.
— Ibé Crawley, Preschool Special Educator

After 24 years I still love coming to work. My rewards come from watching these young adults [with disabilities] become as independent as each one possibly can. I recently had a reunion of my former students. It was wonderful touching base with 35-year-olds. Most are working in the community, and some are living independently, and some are still living at home.
— Barbara Jackson, High School Special Education Teacher

Liking the Variety

Special education teachers have opportunities to work in a variety of different settings, with various age groups, and with children with different kinds of disabilities. They also usually work as part of a team of education professionals whose goal is to provide the best education experience for each child:

My job is very interesting. I'm always doing something different. Each of my days has some structure, yet always has suprises as well. I like working with kids with different ranges of abililities.
— Ellie White, Special Education Teacher

I work with quite a diverse group, made up of professionals with different specialities. As the special educator of the team, I bring knowledge of assessment and alternate teaching techniques to the group. I also watch out for students who are falling behind, those identified as having disabilities as well as those who aren't identified.
— Corina Coronel, Special Education Resource Teacher, Elementary Level

Enjoying the Challenges

Special education teachers are also excited by the unique challenges posed by teaching students with disabilities:

I chose special education because I needed the challenge of working with kids who don't follow traditional paths of learning. Teaching becomes an art form when your style of teaching changes [sometimes] daily, to meet the needs of the kids. What's my biggest challenge? Trying to teach visual communication skills [American Sign Language] to a child with an attention span of 15 seconds!
— Kathy Pongor, Special Education Teacher

Because I am an Hispanic and a bilingual special educator, I am also able to work with students and their parents whose native language is Spanish. I can differentiate between "true" learning difficulties and language or cultural difficulties.
— Corina Coronel, Special Education Resource Teacher, Elementary Level

Paraeducators

Over the last 10 years, the number of paraprofessionals in the schools working with children with disabilities has grown from 105,394 in school year 1983–84 to 189,011 in school year 1993–94 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). This growth is expected to continue in the future, especially with the increased number of children with disabilities being included in general education classrooms. Many different names are used to identify these valuable members of the special education team: parapro, paraprofessional, teacher's aide, and paraeducator are just a few used by school districts. We have chosen to use the term "paraeducator" to indicate the key role played by these paraprofessionals.

What Do Paraeducators Do?

Paraeducators generally work under the supervision of the teacher. "Para" means "alongside of" and, like paralegals and paramedics who assist and support lawyers and doctors, paraeducators assist and support teachers in a variety of ways.

Paraprofessionals can have a wide range of responsibilities, from working closely with and under the direct supervision of a teacher, to receiving instruction from a teacher but implementing the actual program of instruction by themselves (Pickett, 1996). The level of responsibility usually is determined by the paraeducator's training and experience, the caseload of the special education teacher, and the policies of the employing school district. Typical tasks for paraeducators include performing instructional activities planned by the teacher, giving the teacher feedback on students' progress, and assisting in clerical duties. In an ordinary day, a paraeducator might take attendance, tutor a child in a particular skill, monitor the lunchroom, assist the teacher in administering a test, and, when the students have gone home, work with the teacher on plans for the next day or week. As paraeducators receive training, they are able to take on greater levels of responsibility for classroom management and instructional planning.

Paraeducators are usually assigned to and work with one teacher and are typically supervised by the classroom teacher with whom they are working. However, if a paraeducator is working with a child with a disability who is placed in a general education classroom, the paraeducator may be supervised or receive direction from a special education teacher who does not stay in the classroom. This duality of supervision can cause problems.

What Training Do Paraeducators Receive?

Roughly 70% to 90% of paraeducators are hired without prior training. Much of the training that paraeducators receive is done on the job and is provided by the teachers and other paraeducators. In addition, some school districts provide formal in-service sessions to enhance the training paraeducators get from teachers.

As paraeducators are being required to tackle more complex tasks, some districts have developed a career ladder or tier program through which paraeducators, with appropriate training and experience, can be promoted to greater levels of responsibility and compensation. There is a slowly growing trend to recognize the multiplicity of roles that paraeducators play and to reward them accordingly.

Paraeducators have been found to be an excellent pool of potential teachers, because they generally plan to stay in their local communities and have already had excellent experience in the classroom with children with disabilities. Some school districts and states, recognizing this, have developed programs that help the paraeducator to move through the necessary professional preparation to meet state licensing requirements so that they can become teachers (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

What Standards Are There for Paraeducators?

As paraeducators are being utilized more widely , more and more states are developing standards for them (Pickett, 1996). Approximately 15 states now have some sort of credentialing system for paraprofessionals, and several more states are considering implementing credentialing systems. Some states that don't have credentials have established training requirements. This is especially true for paraeducators working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Parent Tips for Working with Teachers

Parents play a vital role in their child's education. They are equal partners in the team that develops their child's IEP, and they care deeply that their son or daughter learns and grows as a student and as a person. In the course of their child's educational career, parents may interact with a large number of professionals (e.g., their child's special education teacher, general education teacher, occupational therapist, speech therapist, physical therapist, and perhaps many different consultants). Being able to work effectively with these many professionals, exchanging ideas and concerns, communicating openly about what's working and what's not, are important elements in their

child's educational success. This section offers suggestions to parents on how to establish and maintain good working relationships with the professionals involved in their son or daughter's education. These tips were collected from several parents of children of a variety of ages, with a variety of disabilities.

The Basics

• Remember that, as a parent, you know your child best and have the greatest investment in him or her. You need to diplomatically but strongly advocate for your child.

• Develop relationships with the teachers who work with your child.

• Get information, and know your options.

• Remember that the people you are working with also care for your child.

• You need to be credible and informed to have people listen to and respect what you say. Be sure to learn what your rights are.

• Be aware that parents have a lot of power. Don't wait for two months to check in for results. If something is not resolved quickly, work on it. Teachers don't always have as much leverage as you think. You may be able to help your child's teacher resolve something much faster. Work as a team.

• Remember that working with the school can a very emotional, personal process, because this is your child. It's very easy to feel defensive. Try to describe your needs in behavioral terms, not emotional terms.

• Keep things in perspective: Ask yourself, "Is what my child is doing typical for his age group, or does his behavior have to do with his disability?" Encourage those who work with your child to do so, too.

• Know that everything you do is not written in stone. You can change things. Just because you decided something at the end of June doesn't mean you have to do it for the next year. You can change it at the end of October if it's not working. You can call the committee back and ask to reevaluate the situation.

• Reaffirm that "I don't expect you to fix my child" but to help him or her learn.

• Remember to think of your child first. The disability is just part of who your child is. Remind people of your child's strengths. Encourage teachers to praise him or her.

• Ask the teacher to have your child be in the helper position at times, not always the one being helped.

• Encourage a work ethic at home. Put value on those traits that promote success in school: responsibility, consequences for behavior, organization, and punctuality. Jobs at home translate into expectations. A sense of cooperation and self-worth follow.

• If you are not sure about how to talk with teachers, connect with other parents. It's like an adult buddy system. Talk to other parents about what they are doing. You can get a parent advocate to work with you—someone who's gone through what you're going through.

Communication

• The most important thing to do is to establish open communication. Try to be non-threatening. You *can* make friends and get what you need.

• Look at yourself closely to identify habits or attitudes that interfere with effective communication or your being taken seriously.

• Be sure to communicate any concerns or ideas right away, over the phone or with a note, while the discussion can be relatively casual. By communicating early, you can avoid becoming angry and frustrated; by intervening early, you can avoid a situation growing into a bigger problem or crisis.

• One very effective way to keep communication open is to use log books. The teachers (and others who are working with your child) write in these each day and send them back home with the child. The parent reads what the teacher writes and responds and sends the book back with the child. These are especially effective with non-verbal children. It keeps the communication open between parent and teacher. Plus, sometimes writing to a teacher makes it easier to communicate an idea in the way that you want to express it.

• Inform teachers immediately of any unusual circumstances occurring at home. A stressed child cannot attend to task, often exhibits disruptive behavior, or may simply space out. Teachers may misread the signs. Examples range from divorce to a sick grandmother to a new baby. Each student has a very different response to these life changes.

Creative Problem Solving

• In order to get your point across or convince people to try something they might not be inclined to do, be positive and enthusiastic. Be very upfront and give them factual information about your child's needs to alleviate their fears. Explain the reasons you want something done, then suggest ways to do it.

• Keep experimenting. You never know what will work.

• Ask that your child participate in everything, even at a modified level of activity.

• Convince people to try new activities or approaches before disqualifying them, even if it's for a trial time of one month.

• Aim high.

Meetings

• If you feel that decisions are being made without you, call and ask to be included in discussions. You can suggest a "pre" IEP meeting to talk about some of your ideas and what your goals and the goals of your child are. This is especially helpful for meetings that involve therapists and/or both special and general education staff. By talking before the meeting with the specific people who are responsible for your areas of concern, you can structure the formal meeting so it goes smoothly and so the entire group can sign off with only one meeting.

• Make a list of things you want to say before you go to a meeting and take it with you.

• When you meet, give yourself plenty of time to discuss important issues.

• Bring someone with you to the meeting for moral support—your spouse, a friend, a sibling.

Good Parent-Teacher Relations

• Write letters or make calls to say thank you when things are going well. It's always a good idea to let educators know about successes, especially those that occur outside of school. For really successful occurrences, send a copy of your letter to the principal or supervisor, so he or she, too, will know what a great job your child's teacher is doing.

• Even if you don't agree with the methods that are being used, if your child is improving, recognize it.

• Maintain a "we" attitude. Ask how "we" can work together to solve a given problem. Hopefully, teachers and parents have the same objectives in mind. Teachers often need help, not criticism.

• Don't hesitate to admit if you're wrong.

• Write articles to the local paper about one of your child's success stories. It's good for the school, the teacher, and your child.

• If you're part of a parent group, consider inviting teachers and/or administrators to a meeting every now and again. They are probably curious about what parent groups talk about and would appreciate being included in discussions. Their perspectives are often very enlightening, and they may have concerns that never occurred to the parents. Remember, inclusion isn't only for kids.

• Work on creating a good relationship with all the people who work with your child. Be open to sharing information about your child.

• Be willing to take part. Volunteer to help out with things. Be as involved as possible.

• Remember people at the end of each year. Little notes or gifts of thanks will be very appreciated by those who receive them.

• Praise the people who work with your child even when things aren't going as well. Appreciate them when they've had a particularly hard day with your child. You may know all too well what that's like. Encourage them to keep trying, that tomorrow will be better, that you appreciate their efforts on your child's behalf.

Conclusion

Teaching students with special needs requires a great deal of training, determination, creativity, and energy. It requires the flexibility to work in a variety of situations—self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, and in conjunction with general educators. Special educators, like general educators, are unique individuals with great tenacity and a passion for their work. They are full of energy and ideas and have never-give-up attitudes. They give children with special needs much hope and love, and, most important, belief in themselves.

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VIDEO RESOURCES

National Professional Resources makes available a number of videos of interest to special educators and paraprofessionals:

Dover, W. (1996). *Where do I start?* [Videotape 1, in the training video series for paraprofessionals]. 40 minutes.National Professional Resources.

Dover, W. (1996). *Working with students in the inclusive classroom* [Videotape 2]. 40 minutes. National Professional Resources.

Dover, W. (1996). *Working with other adults in the inclusive classroom* [Videotape 3]. 40 minutes. National Professional Resources.

Facing inclusion together through collaboration and co-teaching. (1993). National Professional Resources.

The power of two: Making a difference through co-teaching. (1996). National Professional Resources.

Contact: National Professional Resources, 25 South Regent Street, Port Chester, NY 10573. Telephone: 1-800-453-7461. E-mail: info@nprinc.com
URL: http://www.nprinc.com

Organizations

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036-1186. Telephone: (202) 293-2450. URL: http://www.aacte.org

American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES), University of Utah, Milton Bennion Hall, Rm 221, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. Telephone: (801) 585-5659; (801) 581-5223. E-mail: acres@gse.utah.edu

American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey, NW, Washington, DC 20001. Telephone: (202) 879-4400. E-mail: afteditor@aol.com
URL: http://www.aft.org

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589. Telephone: (703) 620-3660; (703) 264-9446 (TTY). E-mail: cec@cec.sped.org URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589. Telephone: (800) 328-0272. E-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ericec.htm

ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036-1186. Telephone: (800) 822-9229; (202) 293-2450. E-mail: ericsp@inet.ed.gov
URL: http://www.ericsp.org

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1730 Rhode Island, NW, Suite 909, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: (202) 463-3980; (800) 229-9074.
URL: http://www.nbpts.org

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE), 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589. Telephone: 1-800-641-7824; 703-264-9476; 703-264-9480 (TTY). E-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm

National Education Association, 1201 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: (202) 833-4000. URL: http://www.nea.org

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY), P.O. Box 1492, Washington, DC 20013-1492. Telephone: 1-800-695-0285 (Voice/TTY); (202) 884-8200 (Voice/TTY).
E-mail: nichcy@aed.org
URL: http://www.nichcy.org

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), Switzer Building, 330 C Street, SW, Washington, DC 20202. Telephone: (202) 205-5465.
URL: http://www.ed.gov/officers/OSERS/

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Switzer Building, 330 C Street, SW, Washington, DC 20202. Telephone: (202) 205-5507.
URL: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/index.html

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